

Oral History Interview with

JAMES BORDEN, JR.

May 4, 1999
Skyland

Interviewer: Carrie Janey

Transcribed by: Gloria Updyke

Shenandoah National Park
Luray, VA

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Transcription

CJ: Ok, this is Tuesday, May 4, 1999. And we're at the Skyland Lodge office. And this is Carrie Janey, talking with James Borden. And we're going to talk about Skyland in roughly 1932, 1932. So I'll get you to tell me your full name, a little bit about you, where you grew up.

JB: My full name is James P. Borden, Junior. I uh, grew up in Front Royal. And lived there uh, from 19, my birth in 1920.

CJ: Ok.

JB: And we lived there until 1933, and we moved to Charlottesville, Virginia.

CJ: How long did you live in Charlottesville?

JB: I lived in Charlottesville from '33 until uh, '43, when I graduated from the university in engineering and went into the service.

CJ: Ok, so you were around the park throughout its development, around the counties surrounding the park, and knew what was going on as far as the people being removed from the mountain, and the land being acquisitioned? You were familiar with that?

JB: I was. I was uh, also a boy scout, so I did hike up on the mountains around Front Royal.

CJ: Ok.

JB: So that I followed, really, the entrance to the uh, Skyline Drive, even before it was built. Followed that area

CJ: Uh huh. And did hiking there?

JB: Yeah.

CJ: Ok, now you said you came to Skyland in 1931?

JB: I came to Skyline, -land, in 1931 or '32. I'm not positive as to, and it was on the 4th of July.

CJ: Oh, it was?

JB: And, and my father, who was the manager of the telephone company in Front Royal, Luray, and uh, Romney, West Virginia, and Moorefield.

CJ: Mm hmm.

JB: and some of those areas, and all the small towns around here. But Luray was part of it. And uh, I came to uh, on this, this particular day, my father was coming up here, from a man from Luray who was in the telephone business here. His name was Cletus Strickler.

CJ: Mm hmm.

JB: And the 3 of us rode horseback up the mountain.

CJ: From Luray?

JB: Bottom of the mountain.

CJ: Ok.

JB: The farm, where you picked up the horses, and uh, my dad uh, tried to make sure that we had horses that were trained, and I say healthy, but not frisky.

CJ: Right.

JB: We didn' t want to get anyone thrown off.

CJ: Right. Not any young horses.

JB: So I uh, I had ridden a horse a number of times when I visited my relatives on farms up near Strasburg.

CJ: Uh huh.

JB: And uh, their farm was in one of the bends of the Shenandoah River, so we were very involved with the Shenandoah Mountains, the Massanutten Mountains, but uh, we came up the mountain, and uh, at that time I remember coming up a rather steep grade and then sort of getting into a level area.

CJ: So was it a road? Or more of a path?

JB: It was a, it was a double lane.

CJ: Ok.

JB: Double, for, so.

CJ: So that a wagon maybe?

JB: It was like 2 paths, so that a wagon could go up.

CJ: Ok.

JB: But it wasn't one that cars would have ease coming up. They may have been able to come up, but uh, the uh, the grade in places was pretty steep. And if it had been raining, it would have been practically impossible for an automobile to come up.

CJ: Right.

JB: So uh, we got here and there were quite a few people around. And I do remember, uh, Cletus and my dad meeting Mr. Pollock. And of course they introduced me to him.

CJ: Mm hmm.

JB: And he shook my hand, of course. And uh, he was very friendly. I uh, my recollection was that he was very pleased with the new telephone system he had put in.

CJ: Is that how he knew Mr. Strickler? Or did Mr. Strickler know Pollock personally?

JB: No, see, uh, the uh, I would say that uh, they had, Mr. Cletus Strickler had been the foreman of the group that put up the new telephone lines. So he had obviously known Mr. Pollock.

CJ: Ok.

JB: Uh, and my dad had been up here before, so he knew Mr. Pollock too. And Mr. Pollock seemed to be pleased that the telephone service had been improved.

CJ: Right.

JB: You know, that was the big thing, because the uh, about that time they were having a lot of transactions related to whether or not this was going to be a national park. And they wanted good communications. They didn't want to have confusion and try to deal with noise on the telephone lines. Static.

CJ: Right. He had had a telephone before. It was just improved at this point?

JB: Right.

CJ: OK.

JB: They had uh, I ' m told, I was told that the original telephone lines in many places were attached to the trees, so it wasn ' t a usual telephone line.

CJ: Right.

JB: And consequently it tended to be noisy, and all kind of things that interfered with communications. But this time they had built a line that went down and it was all on telephone poles.

CJ: Telephone poles.

JB: Small ones. And I believe it went straight down the mountain so that, and it was cleared around. The trees were cut down around it and so on.

CJ: Uh huh.

JB: It was a good job. But uh, I do remember that uh, Mr. Pollock, uh had a bugle. And I do remember hearing it moan.

CJ: Uh huh.

JB: I didn ' t, wasn ' t in his presence when he did blow it. But he was such a, he dressed differently from everybody else. So that you ' d, couldn ' t help but know who he was.

CJ: That was him. Do you remember meeting his wife at all?

JB: Um, I don ' t believe he was married at the time.

CJ: Ok.

JB: He got married later, because in, in the Skyland book, he had quite a shine for some of the young girls that came up. He talks about himself, and uh, but uh, I remember that we went to a, a, we arrived in time for the big meal on the 4th of July, and then we ate in the dining hall.

CJ: Uh huh.

JB: Um, and it was obviously a special meal. And there were a lot of favors for everybody at each place.

CJ: Uh huh.

JB: Everybody had hats to put on and little uh, noisemakers, and uh, little poppers that you would call.

CJ: Right.

JB: Pop-a-cap, and uh, so we had this big meal. And also there was an orchestra up there.

CJ: Really?

JB: A small orchestra, 5 or 6 people.

CJ: Uh huh.

JB: But, but they just filled the, whenever they played it was very loud.

CJ: About how many people were at the dinner?

JB: I don't, I couldn't estimate it.

CJ: Ok.

JB: It's not quite that clear. But uh, it seemed to me to be a room full of people. And uh, then, there was, there were some things that, it was a very festive scene. And it seems to me that uh, after eating and getting all of these things together that we were to take back, we, I guess. We probably said goodbye to Mr. Pollock. And we went out of the room, and then we went over to where the horses were, being held.

CJ: Mm hmm.

JB: And so we, we got on the horses. I had on a hat, I still was wearing my paper hat, and I had some kind of noise maker, like a clicker. And I got on the horse first, and my, my dad helped me up. And uh, then as he was getting ready to get on his horse, I was uh, getting ready to try to get my stuff that I was carrying, stuffed in my pockets. And trying to not get the horse excited. But uh, then I uh, I couldn't get the horse to go, and uh, to move.

CJ: Mm hmm.

JB: And I uh, turned my heels around and I thought that I just touched the horse with my heels. I didn't really kick him or anything like that. But the horse took off with me. At a full gallop.

CJ: Oh, my goodness.

JB: And I was uh, not strong enough to stop the horse. And it ran across this field, which I was going to show you in this book. It was, it's 241. No, this was, the picture. Let's say the horse was back around here.

CJ: Uh huh.

JB: Sort of near the trees. And the horse ran across this flat field, right toward the cabin. I didn't know if it was going to stop before it jumped over the mountain. But, all of a sudden it stopped. I couldn't stop it.

CJ: Right at the cabin?

JB: Practically. At the porch. Uh, I was as close to the porch as that wall.

CJ: Oh, my goodness.

JB: And it stopped so quick that I went over its head. And I had been hanging onto the saddle.

CJ: Uh huh.

JB: And uh, as good fortune would have it, I landed on my feet.

CJ: Wow.

JB: And I had the bridle in my hand.

CJ: Uh huh, you never let go of it?

JB: Never let go of it. I couldn't believe it.

CJ: So you were standing there with you horse still in reins.

JB: I was standing, my dad was racing towards, he thought I was gone. So he and Cletus came running. They thought they were going to have to rescue me from the cliff.

CJ: This was the tame horse that?

JB: This was the tame horse. But it had a pretty good run, that scared them to death, and then scared me to death. And at that point when I was standing there holding the

bridle when they came up, they couldn't believe it either. And it was a miracle that I didn't get my neck broken.

CJ: So did you get on the horse and ride it back down the mountain?

JB: No, my dad wouldn't let me get back on. So he got on that horse and I got on the horse that he was riding. Which seemed to be much tamer. And um, we rode down the mountain, and we had no problems. And I seemed to be at an age that didn't bother me too much. And I uh, was a, and that was sort of in those days, but I remember seeing the cabins, that had all the bark exposed. And I remember the buildings, particularly the dining hall. It seemed like it had been totally made of materials that had just been taken right out of this area.

CJ: Right.

JB: Nothing of a finished surface.

CJ: So more rustic looking.

JB: Everything was very, very rustic. Everything was done in a very party-like atmosphere for this occasion. And I do know that there were going to be some fireworks at night, but we weren't uh.

CJ: You didn't stay for?

JB: Going to hang around for that.

CJ: Do you remember any other children being there?

JB: Yeah, there were some younger people.

CJ: Were there?

JB: Uh, some that were younger than I was. But all of us, all of the youngsters were, had so many things at their places that were uh.

CJ: Kept you occupied?

JB: I even had, I think I had one of those little pinwheels that moves, it twirls in the wind.

CJ: So that was at everyone's.

JB: It must have been spinning when I was on that horse.

CJ: When you were on that horse.

JB: But that's an experience that I have never forgotten, and I like to tell people about it. But uh.

CJ: But a very relaxed atmosphere? No one seemed to worry that things were going to change, that the park was going to come?

JB: Well the thing that I uh, as far as the park was concerned. Since, uh my father was the telephone manager. For instance he knew a man named Will Carson.

CJ: He did?

JB: On a first name basis. I mean they were good friends.

CJ: Uh huh.

JB: He was a Rotarian. Many of them were. He knew Harry Byrd.

CJ: He did?

JB: Yeah. Of course, Harry Byrd lived in Winchester. And my father, was uh, he was involved in the telephone business. He was also involved with the apple business.

CJ: Ok.

JB: Because that was his background. He, he had gone to the [B.I. ____] and was uh, trained in, I don't know what the proper title would be, but fruit trees was a specialty that he knew a lot about.

CJ: So did he have an orchard?

JB: He had an orchard near Linden.

CJ: Ok.

JB: And uh, his, his brothers ran a company called Borden uh, Lumber Company. And there's one in Strasburg that's still there, and there was one in Front Royal.

CJ: So that was your uncle?

JB: Well that was his brother.

CJ: Ok.

JB: My uncle, yeah. He had uh, see he was uh, he grew up in Tom ' s Brook.

CJ: Ok.

JB: And he uh, let ' s see, he had 2 sisters. And um, 6 brothers?

CJ: Wow.

JB: And all 6 of them were in this area. And 4 of them were in Front Royal. So when we were growing up it was Ot Gordon, he was, Ot, Joe, Jess, Harry, and James, Jim, I must of, and then Cinda, she was the one. Cinda married Frank Ramey who lived, who had a farm in, in, that was uh, inside of one of the bends of the North Fork of the Shenandoah, near Fisher ' s Hill.

CJ: Mm hmm. I know all these places.

JB: Yeah. So, all of our, my upbringing, the other thing that uh, being uh, my father being involved in the telephone company required that he go to these little places like Little Washington, Flint Hill.

CJ: Mm hmm.

JB: The Remount, uh, we didn ' t go to uh, in Luray, uh Overall. Do you know where Overall is?

CJ: Mm hmm.

JB: Do you?

CJ: I do.

JB: Well they had a, they had a uh, there was this, the Borden brothers had this, I mentioned that they were in the lumber business, but their specialty was to make barrels for apple.

CJ: Uh huh.

JB: And for lime.

CJ: Uh huh.

JB: So they actually had the equipment to make the staves for the barrels. And so they uh, they had a plant for making barrels at Overall.

CJ: Really, I didn't realize there was any industry there at all.

JB: Well, it's not, it, it uh, uh barrels for uh, as containers for selling produce, sort of went out with the buggy whips.

CJ: Right.

JB: And uh.

CJ: So was there a post office? Was there a small town?

JB: Yeah, there was a small town, and uh, the, there was a family in the town of Front Royal by the name of Herr. H-E-R-R. They were uh, uh, I believe that uh, I believe that they may have been involved, they, I think there was a lime kiln in that area.

CJ: Really?

JB: Yeah. Anyway these barrels, they were being used to ship lime. Yeah, I don't think they were as good as apple barrels, but uh.

CJ: Mm hmm. They'd be mighty heavy.

JB: Yeah. But anyway, the Herrs, the Bordens were involved in this business in Overall. What else can I tell you?

CJ: Do you remember any, um, what was said about the people who were living here at the time. Do you remember any articles in the newspaper, or?

JB: About the people?

CJ: Mm hmm. What was the sentiment in Front Royal towards the coming of the park? Did people feel bad that others were losing their homes? Were people in favor?

JB: I think there was a lot of, now that you brought that up, I remember there was. Well, the first thing, I knew that there were trips into the park by people who were evaluating whether this would become a national park. And because of the communications.

CJ: Mm hmm.

JB: See sometimes I think my father may have either uh, uh gone with some who did that.

CJ: Right.

JB: I don't think he was with that group that uh, the large group that came here to finally make that decision and ride for the full length as described in his, Mr. Pollock's book. But.

CJ: The Southern Appalachian National Park Committee.

JB: Yeah, but uh, there were a lot of small trips.

CJ: Really?

JB: But there was quite a bit of talk about moving the mountaineers out.

CJ: Mm hmm.

JB: And the talk was uh, pretty critical.

CJ: Of the people?

JB: It was critical of the way they were living. After they came out.

CJ: Right.

JB: And they would say that the houses have been built for these people over near Standardsville, or uh, and would you believe that they are putting the coal in the bathtubs? They put the coal in the bathtub! When the uh, the government is delivering the coal to them.

CJ: Right.

JB: But they don't know that they are supposed to put it outside and bring it inside, and they won't. That was one thing. And, oh the other things was when the CCC camps came in.

CJ: Uh huh.

JB: There was one fairly close to Front Royal.

CJ: Right.

JB: And uh, my parents were Baptists. And my mother was quite involved in the church.

CJ: Right.

JB: So uh, she was interested in seeing that some of these CCC boys came to church. And so when they did come, she would always introduce herself to them. And I really think that there was a couple that she invited to our house for Sunday dinner.

CJ: Really?

JB: Yeah, we didn't get to be real buddies with them, but we tried to be friendly to them.

CJ: So that was a positive thing, that the CCC boys were here doing work? I mean, did you?

JB: Yea, yeah, because the mountains were so unkept that you could hardly walk in places.

CJ: Right.

JB: And I can remember trying to even get through some of these places when we would go out hiking.

CJ: Uh huh.

JB: So we were thinking they would clear them up. And then we learned more about what they were going to do. They uh, they would build walls and they would try to make areas accessible for hikes, and uh, mark the trails, you wouldn't get lost.

CJ: So did you ever hike any of the trails after they had worked on them, or?

JB: Yeah, I came up them, up the mountain, and walked, early on. While I think about it there were other things that I remember, talk about the mountaineers. You know as you go down is it 231 that runs from Madison to Sperryville?

CJ: Yes.

JB: That area in particular, uh, my

CJ:

[tape runs out]